

Housing in Canada is Needed

by Humphrey Carver, 1939

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Housing is Needed

By HUMPHREY CARVER

DECAY creeps upon a nation that is not rebuilding itself. Nature has provided that every living organism must continually replace its mortal fabric; trees, insects, animals and human society are governed equally by this law. Timbers rot, houses deteriorate, cities become slums. A nation that is content to sit at home and be overtaken by this process is a nation paralyzed.

For almost a decade Canada has watched its cities deteriorate while those that should have been at work building have sat at home in grief and despair, forgetting their skill. The story is told by the statistics:

	Value of Construction Contracts in Canada	Workers in the Construction Industry	
		Employed	Not employed
1926	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIIIII	
1927	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIIIII	
1928	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIIIII	
1929	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIIIII	
1930	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIIIII	
1931	\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$	IIIIIIII	III
1932	\$\$\$\$	IIII	IIII
1933	\$\$\$	III	IIII
1934	\$\$\$	IIII	IIII
1935	\$\$\$\$	IIII	IIII
1936	\$\$\$\$	IIII	IIII
1937	\$\$\$\$\$	IIII	III
1938	\$\$\$\$	IIII	IIII

Each \$ represents \$30 million.
Each I represents 20,000 construction workers.

From this diagram it will be seen that the present employment in the Construction industry is now only half that of 1926 which was a normal year. Half the nation's building personnel is either on

relief at the public expense, or is earning a precarious living at some trivial occupation or is replacing workers in other industries. The number of men normally employed upon construction is rather more than 200,000. Although this is only 6% of the total male working population it must be realized that the construction industry is the keystone in the economic arch and that any failure in its strength throws a severe strain upon all other industries. For every 100 men that are employed on the site of a construction job there are 150 men employed elsewhere in obtaining raw materials, in fabricating them and in transporting them to the job. Lumber must be cut, milled and finished for floors, doors and furniture. Material for cement and bricks must be quarried and processed. Steel must be prepared and formed for joists, windows and furnaces. Trucks, graders and all manner of tools must be manufactured and kept in repair. In fact there is hardly a person in the community that is not directly or indirectly affected by the volume of construction work in progress.

Because the machinery set in motion by construction work is so very widely distributed it is impossible to estimate the amount of employment that would be created by a building programme. Even a casual consideration of the subject must, however, convince the most sceptical that there could be no more effective stimulus to the national circulation than a well-planned construction programme. In what direction should our constructive energies be released? What part of our national equipment has suffered most from the failure of the construction industry to fulfil its normal task of replacement? Undoubtedly deterioration is most noticeable in the Housing equipment of the nation because domestic building is the most perishable and quickly out-dated form of construction. A house is a consumable article that is not built to last forever; in fact it is not desirable that it should do so since each succeeding generation requires a different type of accommodation. At the present time the great majority of the population is compelled to occupy a type of dwelling that was designed for a pattern of life that no longer exists; the whole structure of family life and the entire standard of household amenities have been revolutionized during the last quarter of a century. It is in the building of new homes and new neighbourhoods, adapted to contemporary habits and standards, that our constructive energies should be released.

The logical place to begin this process of reconstruction is at the interior of the cities and towns where the lowest income families inhabit the most obsolete dwellings. The cost of constructing these buildings has long since been paid and they have fulfilled their normal term of life. The unnecessarily high rents exist only to pay taxes on an entirely fictitious value and to meet the high cost of keeping an obsolete structure weatherproof. It is by a peculiar perversion of justice that the lowest income families are compelled to live on the highest taxed land and to occupy the homes that are most difficult

to maintain. Unfortunately, while re-Housing this section of the population offers the most useful opening for the construction industry, the beginning of building operations is hedged about with difficulties which our governments have refused to face squarely.

The primary difficulty is that those who most urgently require Housing are not in a position to finance the cost of building. Because in the past our cities and towns have been built up with privately-owned homes there is no tradition of building for a tenant population and there is no type of agency that has experience of such a task. Furthermore, our whole system of land subdivision is based on the individual ownership of the single home; even those apartment-houses and duplexes that are built to be rented have to adapt their plans to an inappropriate form of land subdivision; they are consequently dark, badly oriented and inadequately provided with open spaces. Meanwhile in an age of precarious employment and uncertain family prospects the proportion of tenant households is increasing. There is now an urgent need for some form of Housing Authority to undertake the reconstruction of obsolete areas at the centres of the cities and to build new neighbourhoods at the outskirts for the use of this growing element of the urban population.

The following diagram will serve to show the preponderance of families that are unable to build or own their own homes. Since such calculations must be made on the basis of the 1931 census no allowance has been made for the many families whose incomes have subsequently been reduced.

Income	Amount available for Shelter each month	Number of families
less than \$ 400	less than \$ 6.50	IIIIIIII
\$ 400— 799	" " 13.30	IIIIIIIIII
800— 1,199	" " 20.00	IIIIIIIIIIIIII
1,200— 1,599	" " 25.00	IIIIIIIIIIIIIIII
1,600— 1,999	" " 33.30	IIIIIIIIII
2,000— 2,399	" " 40.00	IIIIII
2,400— 2,799	" " 46.60	IIII
2,800— 3,199	" " 53.30	III
3,200— 4,999	" " 83.30	IIII
more than 5,000	more than	III

Each I represents 1 per cent of families in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg.

From this diagram it can be seen that 62% of our urban families have an income which should not permit them to pay more than \$25 a month for shelter (20% of income is a recognized budget for rent). In fact, this group of families is compelled to pay from 30% to 50% of its income for shelter; this in itself indicates the pressing need for a New Deal in Canadian Housing.

The future stability of employment depends upon re-establishing the construction industry as the keystone of the economic arch. This can most effectively be done by setting to work to provide decent low-rent Housing for the majority of our urban population that now inhabits homes that were built in the Victorian and Edwardian periods of history.